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ABSTRACT

Misunderstandings across communication situations frequently occur due to gender differences in communication styles, differences in either meanings or values attached to the linguistic symbols used to convey a message. An analysis of communication in the classroom based on Walter J. Ong's educational history, "Fighting for Life Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness," and Deborah Tannen's "You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation," suggests that stress for students and teachers alike may stem from the differences in the way that men and women teachers conduct discussions, make assignments and draw up syllabi. In most communication situations, the typical female response is non-agonistic; it centers on cooperation, feeling, emotion and connection. By contrast, the male pattern is hierarchical, argumentative and order-giving. Steps to help the teacher understand how these differences play into the classroom situation include (1) identifying the teacher's "stressor" (which gender style he or she leans toward and to what extent); (2) recognizing the difficulties that can occur when the teacher's gender style is different from the "ruling" style in the classroom; (3) acknowledging that female students can tolerate more in the way of step-by-step instructions and assignments intended to track students' progress; and (4) learning to use a variety of communication strategies, those of the same as well as the opposite gender. An understanding of such gender difficulties can lead to practical approaches to ameliorating them, including how to issue rules or assignments, how to direct discussions so as to minimize stress, and how to avoid the teacher's feeling of not being in control. (Two tables and five references are included.) (TB)

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Fighting For Life In The Academy:

Solutions to Gender Relationships From A Historical View¹

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Little attention has been given to the basic stress caused by gender based misunderstandings in communication. On a long range basis misunderstanding undermines trust and collaboration (Simons and Cornwall 42-45); both of which are essential in an effective learning environment. Misunderstandings across communication situations frequently occur due to gender differences in communication styles, differences in either meanings or values attached to the linguistic symbols used to convey a message or both. To appreciate that "the seeds of women's and men's [communication] styles are sown in the ways they learn to use language while growing up" (Tannen 1990) is significant in our ability to understand and work with other people.

Walter Ong's work, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality and Consciousness* speaks to this topic and its application in the academic classroom particularly in relation to the ceremonial combat among males (37). Ceremonial combat replaced, according to Ong, actual physical combat that proved a male's place within the

¹ This presentation is a re-working of an article by LaDonna McMurray Geddes and Dennis L. Weeks. (See: Geddes, La Donna and Dennis L. Weeks. "Stressing Out In The Classroom: Misunderstanding and Gender Differences" *Speech and Theatre Association of Missouri Journal*. XXIII (Fall 1993): 1-11.) I acknowledge the great debt I owe to Dr. Geddes in this presentation.

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tribe. Ancient Greek argument based upon rhetoric, dialectic, and logic, Ong maintains, assisted in developing "the Greek fascination with the agonistic structures of speech and thought . . ." and this has continued "through the West, not only in the study of rhetoric, dialectic, and logic, but in a myriad of other less immediately conspicuous ways" (34).

One of those arenas is academics, and that is the focus of my discussion: the misunderstandings that develop within the classroom as a result of the difference between the majority gender of the students and the instructor' gender as well as the gender-based teaching style of the instructor and its effect on the student.

The importance of gender difference to misunderstanding is based upon the several assumptions. First, misunderstanding leaves us all angry and frustrated, in short, stressed. Consequently, we may identify misunderstanding as an important stressor. Second, stress negatively influences our communication style and behavior; we tend to withdraw, avoid or blame others, and try to punish others (Simons and Cornwall 2, 43). Third, stress from one situation often invades the parameters of other situations causing a multi-layered response, often with very complex variations because of the "carryover." Fourth, we need to see stressors as problems that need solutions. In this instance, we need to address gender-based differences in communication styles. Fifth, once we correctly identify and label a problem or situation, then we may more easily establish an appropriate starting point for dealing with it. Sixth, gender differences in communication styles result

in different response patterns. Seventh, and last, the better the communication, the less the risk of misunderstanding and the better the learning environment.

A modified stimulus / response table graphically demonstrates these seven concepts and their respective outcomes.

TABLE ONE

Stimulus / Response: Communication and Misunderstanding

STIMULUS	RESPONSE
Misunderstanding	Anger And Frustration
Stress In Communication	Negative Response
Stress Carryover	Multi-layer Complex Response
Stress Seen As A Problem	Solutions Found To Stress
Proper Identification Mode	Starting Point Established
Recognition of Gender Differences	Different Response Patterns
Better Communication	Better Learning Environment

By their very nature as forums for discussion and learning, contemporary academic classrooms are often subject to misunderstanding among the participants. The male / female mix in the student population is one source for misunderstanding. The gender of the instructors and their knowledge of gender differences in communication styles is another. The instructor's gender related to the dominant gender of any given class is still another. The

interactive nature of these variables is further influenced and complicated by the sheer size of the class. The number of interpersonal relationships we juggle in any given class, by itself, provides the basis for multiple misunderstandings and subsequent stress: such combinations include male student to male student, female student to female student, male student to female student, female teacher to male student, female teacher to female student, male teacher to male student, male teacher to female student and the reverse of all of these combinations as successful communication is a "two-way street."

Precisely because communication is a transactional process that depends on using symbols with different meanings and different values for all users to construct our "two-way street," in addition to dealing with gender differences in communication styles, we must also deal with individual differences in reactions to stressors and stress. What is stressful for one person will not necessarily be stressful for another. We must also recognize that communication is a balancing act in which we all engage as we attempt to fulfill, simultaneously, our need for intimacy and our need for independence (Tannen, 1990, 26-28). We want to bridge the gap between ourselves and our students, yet we recognize the need to retain some degree of distance if we are to retain authority and control over the learning environment. This delineation is thin and often a source of consternation for the beginning teacher, a teacher in a new school system, or a teacher whose reputation is being tested by a new class. The tolerance level and expectations of a teacher

are also tested at the beginning of every semester with a new class.

It is impractical to try to identify all of the gender differences in communication styles within the scope of this article. What we want to do is encourage the instructor to examine teaching style and become sensitized to the impact that style may have upon any given class or instructional situation. It is important, however, to remember that each communication style--male and female--is valid on its own terms and that misunderstanding (and the subsequent stress) arises because the styles are different, not because one style is better than or more legitimate than the other (Tannen, 1990, 47). Learning about style differences will not make them go away, but it can help us to understand why communication goes awry (Tannen, 1990, 47-48).

In *Fighting for Life* Ong devotes a chapter entitled "Academic and Intellectual Arenas" to a discussion of agonistic relationships between faculty members and their students, particularly between a teacher and male student. Claiming that traditionally a teacher was either a friend to the student or "nothing" (Ong, 120), Ong demonstrates the history of such a relationship from the "medieval dialectic and disputation and Renaissance scholarly polemic," down through the eighteenth century and the "formal, forensic, adversary-structured intellectualism of the Founders of the United States," and into this century fading "to the near vanishing point" in the last three decades (Ong, 122).

In order to understand Ong's assertion, we must remember that the oral world, an environment that has no knowledge of writing and is not effected by writing, is a world where knowledge is a hard won, agonistic process. One must "know" something, not by reading, but by memory: "Knowing requires memory. But an oral culture cannot remember by formulating something first and then memorizing it afterward" writes Ong (Ong, 123). Ong further maintains that because a culture is oral "they deal in formulas, in what is already known, [and] all oral cultures ... foster agonistic performance, or virtuosity, in the management of their store of knowledge, and do so with a single-minded intensity sure to affect early formal schooling when it finally begins (Ong, 124).

What accounts for the transition from agonistic performance of the oral culture to the written academic culture we know today is, for Ong, Learned Latin. In the 1,500 year history of Learned Latin, a language passed on by the tribe, not the mother, is divided into two points by Ong: 1) "First, Latin moved boys out of their families into the tribe. As it had gradually ceased to serve as a vernacular language between the fifth and seventh centuries and had become chirographically controlled, with its spoken use dependent on writing rather than vice versa, Latin had also become a sex-linked language, used only by males (again, with quite negligible exceptions). Learned Latin was no longer a 'mother tongue' in the most real sense of this term: it was not used by mothers to raise their children, as vernacular Latin had been until the sixth century or so. Learned Latin was exclusively a tribal

language, learned in school or from tutors ... Latin was the only entry into the tribal wisdom purveyed in academia: in the West in the sixteenth century, and even later, it was not possible, for example, to learn grammar or metaphysics or medicine or most other academic subjects unless one knew Latin, for there was no effective way to set forth academic subjects in the vernaculars, which had no adequate vocabulary or semiotic (interlocking language-and-thought processes) for such technical matters. 2) "Secondly, the learning of Latin took place in the physical hardship setting typical for puberty rites. It normally entailed physical punishment, not as an incidental matter but as a regular procedure. In Renaissance art, a schoolmaster is recognized by his bundle of switches, and the literature attesting to their use is massive. ... Chastisement with the birch or various equivalents was only the ultimate among many physical hardships that the Latin schools imposed: Early hours for assembling,... strict rules of behavior (often including conversation in Latin, even in recreation hours), constant supervision by proctors, and all sorts of competitions that played on the boy's desire and need for agonistic activities but of course at the same time increased the stress" (Ong, 130-31).

Women, Ong points out, were subject to an education also. Unlike their male counterparts, however, the education was not achieved through separation from the home and enduring the rigors of Learned Latin. "Girls of the more advantaged classes in the West often received intensive education, particularly in modern foreign languages and certain other liberal arts such as history,

and in such performing arts as music, painting, and dancing, as well as education in the domestic economy of the time, which extended far beyond today's domestic economy. . . . These occupations included all sorts of health care, gardening, and often marketing, the teaching of elementary reading and writing, religious education, cooking and sanitation, textile manufacturing from the spinning of thread on through the making of garments, and many other skills, not to mention complex administrative work. A young girl of the more advantaged classes might take over the round-the-clock management of a household of perhaps fifty to eighty persons, among whom were dozens of often difficult resident servants. . . . Women were busy. In a certain very real sense, academic education is a leisure activity, and most women did not have time for it (Ong, 134-35).

With women in academics came "the beginning of the end of the agonistic structures . . ." Ong stipulates that "four things happened (1) Latin was dropped, first as a means of instruction and then as a required subject; (2) the agonistic, thesis method of teaching was replaced by less combative methods; (3) written examinations were substituted for public oral disputation and examinations; and (4) of course, physical punishment was minimized or suppressed" (Ong, 135-36).

The differences between the communication styles between males and females in the classroom comes down to us today from the history that Ong has pointed out. What we must remember is that

males most often view this academic communication as agonistic, and that most often, females most often do not.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION STYLES

To provide a starting base for the classroom teacher, the six gender differences in communication styles identified by Tannen in *She said, he said* and *You Just Don't Understand* are particularly important. Table two highlights these six differences:

TABLE TWO
Six Gender Differences In Communication Style

FEMALES	MALES
Likes To Cooperate	Comfortable Giving Orders
Emphasis On Feeling	Emphasis On Argument
Uses Metamessages More Often	More Literal And Direct
Emotional And Detailed	Listens For "Nuts And Bolts"
Process Oriented ("How")	Goal Oriented ("End")
Language Used to "Connect" (Close and the Same)	Languages Used For Status And Independence

Notice how the typically female response is non-agonistic. Female communication is centered in cooperation, feeling, emotion and connection for the most part. On the other hand, the male pattern is a argumentative, order-giving environment that is

literal and direct and uses language for status and independence. When these differences are related back to Ong's work, they are no longer shrouded in misunderstood sex-linked stereotypes that lead far too often to misunderstanding in the class. And, by applying Ong's ideas into our classrooms, we may see their results as we attempt to avoid confrontation because of gender differences.

SEVEN STEPS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL APPLICATION

The prescriptive win-win approach for dealing with any stress- or incorporates seven basic steps. First, identify *your* stressor. How true to your gender are you in your communication style? As a female instructor do you like to cooperate by allowing your students to respond uninterrupted? Do you start your class sessions with "let's do ___, or how about ___?" Do you introduce assignments with "I wish you would ___" or "I would like you to ___"? Are you uncomfortable making demands?

Or, do you lean more toward a male style in which you are comfortable giving orders and trying to get students to follow them: interrupting a student response or announcing "this is what we are going to do; this is how it is to be done."? Do you emphasize feelings or an argumentative (question / challenge) approach during the instruction process or when dealing with your students? Are you using metamessages -- nonverbal cues -- to convey concern and interest in your students *or* are you being literal and direct -- depending on verbal cues to carry the main intent of your message?

When you lecture and interact with your students are you a "story-teller" including detail and description in your responses or do you lean toward the masculine style of "here are the facts ____"? Are you more focused on the process or how something should be done, giving credit for effort as well as end result? Or, do you focus on giving credit only for achieving a goal or end product? Do you use your language skills to "connect" with your students -- as a tool or vehicle for sharing information? Or, do you use your language skills to establish your status and independence: "I know what I am doing" and / or clowning around or telling jokes? You may well incorporate each style's characteristics and that is fine.

The focus of our concern is on recognizing your style and then identifying how that style may or may not inform the dominant style of a class and the subsequent education process as well as the understanding or misunderstanding and stress in any instructor's class.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN TEACHING STYLE

A significant difference between the instructor's style and the "ruling" style of any class--teacher gender compared to the majority gender of the class members or the gender of the vocal leaders of the class--may well be a contributing factor to the instructor feeling stressed and the students not feeling stress, or the exact opposite may occur. For instance, if the teacher is a female and typical of the concept of cooperation, she will want her

students to finish what they are saying before interrupting them because she considers this reaction appropriate behavior. In a class where the male communication style is dominant, however, she could easily have the students start interrupting each other, telling jokes and clowning around with the potential for loosing control of the discussion and, ultimately, the class. The typical female instructor becomes stressed, yet the class (as a whole) does not because these students are responding to the communication style of the classroom, the style that has been established by the male student who is working within an agonistic pattern.

For a female teacher, the potential stressor may be a tendency to emphasize feelings by giving confirmation, support, and working toward consensus. In a class dominated by a male student, questions and challenges may manifest themselves in an argumentative agonistic form. The male style is more often focused on challenging as a means of determining who is in control: the proverbial response of "why, why, why" or "that doesn't make any sense," or "this is nothing but busy work." The female instructor's ability to meet and respond to those arguments may well determine whether she is perceived by the class as an authority figure with whom they must deal, or a soft, spacey, tangential instructor whom the students can manage to the point of controlling the learning environment. The question of style here is how well the female teacher recalls the agonistic male pattern and its particular characteristics.

On the other hand, the male instructor who directs his class according to typical male gender differences illustrated in Table Two will be comfortable in giving direct orders to all his students with such commands as "turn in the assignment now; all of your homework must be typed according to my directives." He will further emphasize and be comfortable with argument and "logical thinking" (which incorrectly assumes, of course, that those students who do not understand the assignments cannot "think for themselves" or "think in a male-style") for success in student work. Rewards will be given to those students who listen to the very direct and very literal instructions of the male instructor: "In order to complete this assignment, you must have *exactly* three outside sources, none of which may be older than two years." Notice that in giving these orders to his students, the male instructor does not allow for compromise between the order-giver (the teacher) and the order-taker (the student). The instructor's language does not attempt to "connect" with the student; rather, often it only seeks to enhance the instructor's status and assert his independence. Also, the communication style is goal oriented, not process oriented. Finally, usually there is no attempt to ameliorate the teaching situation.

Because of the male instructor's communication style, the resulting turmoil in the classroom will leave this instructor wondering why his female class members may fail because his methods are strictly male oriented and agonistic, and there is no attempt to consider the entire class population, or the possibility that

there is a female group present who are completely "out to sea" in his course.

METAMESSAGES

Metamessages are another source of misunderstanding in gender based communication. Metamessages are concerned with the relational aspect of the communication act and reflect attitudes, the interpretation of which are grounded in the perceptions of the student. The role of a teacher subsumes a hierachial status when dealing with students; instructors have information, students do not. A fear of being put down and a concern for independence inherent within the male communication style makes it more difficult for a male student to feel comfortable asking for help as he is in an adversarial position with the teacher. A prerequisite for establishing and maintaining self-respect demands that the male student "find his own way" (Tannen, 1990, 62; Cf Ong, 1981, 118-144).

This concept, alien to the female communication style, can cause the female teacher to experience frustration and anger at the lack of questions that are asked by the members of a male-dominated class or a specific male student. A female teacher will design an assignment with monitoring steps at the end of every section that tries to track student progress and to prevent unnecessary work or mistakes. In accordance with the female communication style

profile, this teaching approach lets the students know the female teacher cares and wants students to be successful.

In a predominantly male class, however, that approach could easily be interpreted by the students as teacher incompetency and that the instructor doubts the student's ability to be successful. Such student supposition of teacher incompetency comes directly from the male oriented learning approach that says "Do not monitor me so closely; I have to 'find [my] own way'" (Tannen 1990, 62 and Ong, 1981). Again, the problem of status and independence comes to the fore to create misunderstanding if the female instructor is unaware that her teaching approach is at fault in this particular male dominated situation. The male instructor, however, will feel very comfortable in the situation as will his gender specific students. Both the male teacher and his male students will know instinctively that the male instructor is developing a question / answer situation that makes use of status and independence and is argumentatively based to develop the agonistic male learning model that calls for self-discovery (Tannen, 1990, 62). There is, in this male / male case, no problem in understanding. There is, however, a problem with the unaware male teacher ignoring the educational needs of his female students; perhaps not at a conscious level, but at a more subtle unconscious level.

PROCESS VERSUS PRODUCT

Process orientation can also cause problems for an instructor using that dimension of the female communication style. For example, providing a male dominant class with a detailed daily syllabus can project a sense of intimidation as the detail of the syllabus is seen by the male students as process, not an end product or outcome. The male students who are goal oriented may well react to a "process outline" with a sense of insecurity and fear. These students often do not understand how the work can be accomplished in the next sixteen weeks. Yet, a class geared toward the female communication style may find considerable security in the "check-list" approach that clearly shows "how" the students achieve the goal. The basic reason for the increased comfort level is the emphasis on *how* assignments are to be completed and *how* multiple learning tasks are to take place. Little or no emphasis is placed on *what* is to be done in the course of the semester.

By the same token, a male instructor, in a female dominated class, who uses a very generic syllabus, may well need to provide assurance that adequate time will be given to complete all daily work. He may never totally establish the trust needed to gain the confidence of his female students as his female students will not respond unless he is able to understand the inherent differences in how they accomplish their educational goals. The male instructor *must* remove himself from relying on his inherent "maleness" as a pedagogical method and become willing to reassure his students through continual emphasis on process teaching: *how* we can accomplish the goal, not *that* we accomplish the goal. And, perhaps

most importantly, he must be willing to understand that the "how-ness" of the approach is as important to the learning environment as the "that-ness" of the syllabus.

In addition to the "how - that" difference, the "connective" use of language is also another important characteristic of the female communication style. Consequently, a female instructor may use a series of questions in a lecture to involve the students more directly in the learning process. For her, the function of talk is interaction (Tannen, 81). In a class dominated by female communication style, students will perceive questions as very important in establishing the sense of connection between teacher and students as the class moves through its syllabus.

Yet, in a class dominated by male communication style, talk is to relay information or to claim attention (Tannen, 1990, 81 & 88). As a result, those same questions may well be perceived as a challenge, a challenge to come up with some specific response. Again, the competitiveness factor is a primary objective in the male classroom because the agonistic claim for attention has been satisfied; connection is not the main goal and certainly not one to which male dominated classes respond with any enthusiasm as they seek information and attention from their instructor.

CONNECTION VERSUS DOMINATION

A major student concern could focus on whether or not the teacher is trying to put them down--the hierachial problem again.

This dimension of communication is also influenced by the fact that, historically, questions are perceived as weapons (and thus important to the male dominated classroom) used to find out what we *do not know*, rather than as display tools designed to find out what we *do know* (Ong, 1990, 119, *et passim*).

A class dominated by the female communication style would question if the teacher is trying to get closer to and more involved with the students or to pull away from them. A female instructor strong in using language to "connect" with others may also be perceived by males as incompetent and insecure. (Note: We know that when students judged female professors, generating more class discussion was perceived as a sign of incompetence.)

As human beings we do not have the option of walking away from our communication style; as teachers we do not have the option of walking away from a class or a series of classes. A day can turn into a disaster when the 8:00 class does not go as planned or desired. What can a teacher do?

DEALING WITH THE STRESSOR

A prescriptive win-win approach for dealing with a stressor incorporates six steps. First, we must identify the stressor. In this instance is the stressor associated with gender differences communication style and the dominant communication style of a class or a particular student? For instance, deadlines may be very real

for the teacher and considerable emphasis is put on the student to meet deadlines as they are originally established.

The instructor may approach the students using a female style: "I would appreciate having your papers by the end of the work day." In a predominantly male class this statement may not get the desired response as the instructor has indicated a wish, not a directive, and no penalty has been associated with noncompliance to the directive. The instructor has used language that seeks to establish "connect-veness" and has emphasized that the process of completing the paper will be finished by "the end of the day," a vague time reference, indeed. In other words, the instructor has not used a male oriented style as the following instructions illustrate:

This is assignment is due by 4:30; any papers turned in after that time will be thrown away.
This assignment cannot be made up.
If you do not complete it your semester grade will go down by one letter grade.

A male dominant class or male students may well respond to the original instructions by asking for extensions to complete the assignment, turn the work in late and still expect full credit, or turn the work in late and attempt to negotiate credit as they are familiar with argument and may become agonistic, even combative, as students attempt to win their point.

The female instructor may feel stressed and distressed by the student reactions; yet, this response pattern is normal considering the gender differences in communication styles. She will not completely empathize with the negotiative quality of the male

student's argument. She will want to connect in some fashion and that bond will, she hopes, negate any "plea bargaining" when the deadline for the assignment draws near. Further, the female instructor will have emphasized the process of the assignment and, quite possibly, assumed the deadline is "understood" as part of the process, not having seen it from a male view as the goal to have been achieved in deference to the process of the assignment.

Consequently, in order to avoid the stress the instructor must complete the critical step of properly identifying the stressor at hand so that the situation may be dealt with in the best manner. In this case, if the instructions are male oriented in presenting the goal of the assignment, "you will finish the assignment by 4:00 p.m. today," then in order to eliminate, and, at the very least, anticipate stress and stressors in the classroom, the teacher must not expect to moderate the assignment presentation by compromising its parameters. The instructor must not attempt to enforce a vague deadline, for example. In this case the stressor is process orientation versus goal orientation. The stress free class is one where this dichotomy is understood.

Second, the teacher must determine just how important the stressor is to the overall "game plan" or teaching goals. Is the possibility of an ulcer over the identified stressor worth the aggravation? As illustrated in the previous example, are deadlines really that important and are meeting deadlines an essential criteria for success in the class? Either choice is acceptable. The instructor must make a choice, commit to that selection, and

then adapt a particular teaching style to achieve the desired choice. The instructor who makes a deliberate choice and then sticks to that decision is the instructor who will experience less stress in the classroom.

Third, once the instructor has determined the overall importance of the stressor, one must decide upon an effective, prescriptive approach for dealing with the stressor. Again, going back to the issue of meeting deadlines: how should the instructions be worded about meeting deadlines; what penalties are to be enforced; what penalties will the department, school, or law support; what is the teacher's reputation for enforcing what is said; what is the comfort level for enforcing behavior; how committed is the instructor to enforcing behavior; does the teacher have the management skills, planning and monitoring, necessary to be effective in dealing with the identified stressor? What is the relationship between the instructor's communication style and the stressor? All of these questions are easily dealt with when an effective prescriptive decision is made. For example, if the assignment instructions are worded in such a direct penalty bearing manner as "The assignment is due by 4:00 p.m. today. If you do not meet that deadline, your final semester grade will be lowered by one letter," then the instructor must be committed to enforcing the student's behavior, even if the student attempts to negotiate the penalty or the deadline. Also, the obvious male oriented phrasing of the deadline clearly identifies how any of the questions discussed above must be answered. On the other hand, a clearly

female orientation to the deadline question will obviously change the responses to the questions. In either case, the stress reduction tactic is to be consistent and to be clear in understanding the gender related responses each case will produce.

Fourth, complete a perception check with the other person who is involved significantly in the stress situation and keep repeating that check until understanding is achieved. Talk to the student and / or class explaining how they are perceived to be reacting and responding. Ask if that was their intent.

Making use of the deadline issue again, we find that over half of a class did not turn in their homework on time, and they all want extensions. The instructor must ask them why they did not get their work done on time and tell them that the received impression is that they are ignoring the class and not taking its deadlines seriously. Ask if this case is true or if there is some other reason they were unable to complete their work in a timely manner. If the reason is not student apathy to the course but is any other reason, then the process must start again. Remember, in a perception check, the instructor keeps paraphrasing what the students are saying until agreement is reached, even if that agreement is only momentary. Also remember that "Yes, I understand" is not an adequate response when doing a perception check. The perception check may be seen as an example of male dominated communication because the instructor *must* be direct and literal.

Fifth, the instructor must implement the chosen course of action whether it is male or female oriented communication.

Failure to be decisive in this step means that stress and stressors in the classroom will continue to build. Students, both male and female, want the security of action and implementation of personal style.

Sixth, follow-up. Do it! The effectiveness of the follow-up will be determined by how realistic the instructor is in recognizing personal style tendencies and determining the type of commitment that will be maintained in the class.

GENDER DIFFERENCES AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Concomitant to dealing with any stressor, individuals must extend themselves to manage gender differences as they relate to interpersonal relations. Simons and Cornwall note that in gender based misunderstanding we tend to automatically withdraw, avoid, blame, or punish the other person rather than recognize that valid gender differences may be at the root of the problem (2, 43). Their assumption has the potential for creating a critical problem for the classroom teacher, particularly if the teacher is dedicated to treating all students as equal. When the gender of the instructor and the dominant gender of the class are the same, there may be the creation of an environment where "some are more equal than others," and those of a different gender are "left out," alienated from the classroom.

When the gender of the instructor and dominant class gender differ, then anger, frustration, resentment, and distrust may grow

into a full blown stinkweed unless there is a willingness to work with the gender based differences.

Simons and Cornwall identify four steps to be used in managing gender differences: steps as applicable to the classroom as to any other activity in life. The steps include clarifying expectations; asking questions to verify understanding [perception check]; offering full pictures of how we see, interpret, and talk about the issue at hand, and establishing clear agreements and creating a process to deal with and manage broken agreements and failed expectations--taking a risk and making a commitment (2, 43-45).

QUESTIONS FOR BETTER COMMUNICATION

Simons and Cornwall's approach to dealing with gender based communication styles means working diligently at opening and maintaining communication channels. In order to accomplish this goal we can ask two types of questions: those that encourage others to talk to and with us and those that paint fuller language pictures of our interpretations and opinions. Questions we can use to *encourage communication* include:

What does ___ mean to you?

What do you say to yourself about ___ ?

How do you picture the situation?

How do you see the pros and cons of a situation?

(2, 44)

Statements we can incorporate into our conversations, lectures, and discussions to let people know of our experiences and share our way of interpreting events include:

Here's how I see ____

Here's what happened to me that leads me to think ____

I imagine that if ____

Some of my constraints are ____ (2, 44)

CONCLUSIONS

What can we say in the final analysis about how misunderstanding in communication can be reduced if we recognize the importance of gender differences in establishing that communication? We can know that working with and recognizing gender differences can help control communication as a stressor. We can also know that a more relaxed, positive learning environment within the classroom setting is possible through understanding gender differences.

In addition, we can understand that as we become more comfortable in using a variety of communication strategies--those of the same as well as opposite gender--we become more effective, able instructors who can truly appeal to the entire classroom population and not be at war with part of it.

Remember that "hurtful and unjustified misinterpretations can be avoided by understanding the conversational styles of the other gender" (Tannen, 1990, 95).

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